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ABSTRACT

After considering the implications of the back-to-the-basics movement, the author concludes that there is little value in going "back" to approaches such as those typical of traditional grammar instruction. Instead, he suggests that sentence combining offers a basic approach to the teaching of writing. An experiment which began with four classes of ninth graders, and which was later extended to other classes and grade levels, found beneficial effects on gereral writing competence, spelling, self-confidence, and syntactic maturity. The only disadvantage found was that three out of every ten students reported a negative attitude toward sentence combining, at the end of the experiment. (AA)

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Forward to Basics Through Sentence-Combining

Edgar H. Schuster

Everywhere these days people are heeding the call to go back to the "basics." That is, basically, all right with me; for I would say (begging forgiveness of Robert Frost), "School's the right place for basics; I don't know where they're likely to go better." But that schools ought to teach basics is not really an issue. The real issues are what truly are the basics and how do we best teach them.

Judging from what is actually happening in English classrooms across the nation, teachers, administrators, parents, and, alas, even many students seem to think that the study of traditional school grammar is the most basic basic we have. We have gone back to diagramming sentences and conjugating verbs. Everywhere students are being drilled on the parts of speech. Everywhere they are underlining subjects once and predicates twice. Everywhere students are being taught definitions that do not define and rules that do not rule.

We have, in short, under the "back to basics" banner, returned to a conservative, anachronistic, and pedagogically ineffective schoolroom tradition. Yet most of what was taught in the grammar aspect of that tradition was not basic, and the instructional model used in that tradition--which is rule or definition, examples, exercises--was a poor model for teaching most children. If I am right that the real issues are what the basics are and how we best teach them, then the real issues are being ducked by the slogan-followers.

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Although my main intention here is to make some positive, forward-looking contributions to the "basics" movement, I have made some serious charges against the schoolroom tradition; and perhaps I should give at least some indication of how I would document those charges before moving on.

Why We Shouldn't Go Back

It has been my observation that an inordinate amount of time is spent in traditional grammar classes on the parts of speech. Students are taught, for example, to distinguish between nouns and verbs. Now, to "know" (in one sense of that verb) the difference between a noun and a verb is rock-bottom basic; for if we couldn't make that distinction, we could neither speak nor write. But a native speaker of a language already has that kind of knowledge before he or she goes to school. On what grounds then do we justify teaching students to memorize definitions and to label parts of speech? Although such knowledge may be of some benefit to students who will study a foreign language and may occasionally help with the teaching of punctuation and usage, it hardly deserves to be called basic. Students may learn to speak and write beautifully with no knowledge whatsoever (in the formal sense) of the parts of speech. Conversely, students may know formal grammar as well as a drill sergeant knows commands and still be hopelessly poor communicators.

I have also charged that traditional school grammar is pedagogically ineffective. Take the traditional definition of "verb" as an example. That part of speech is usually defined as a word that expresses "action" or "state of being." First of all, the concept, "state of being," is so hazy that it should be dropped. Secondly, thousands of nouns express

state of being (as opposed to a mere handful of verbs). Thirdly, many words express action but are not verbs--participles, infinitives, gerunds, and even some nouns, for example. And lastly, many verbs express neither action nor state of being, including such commonly used verbs as have, need, weigh, and resemble. I exclude from this category those verbs that express what textbook writers these days are calling "mental action," though I confess that I find this concept hard to grasp. Perhaps students have an easier time with it.

Do not think that the definition of "verb" is an exception. One can easily do a similar mask-lifting job on virtually any definition in the school-grammar lexicon. Indeed, there is evidence that students who do well in the traditional grammar class do so by ignoring rather than using the typical definitions.

What is the upshot of all this? To me, at least, it means that we must not go back to basics but rather forward to them. And it is about one particular means of moving forward to basics that I would like to speak today. The basic is writing, and the means is the sentence-combining approach.

How Sentence Combining Works

Those who are interested can find a history of sentence combining in Frank O'Hare's booklet entitled Sentence Combining, published by the NCTE in 1973. The same pamphlet describes O'Hare's research with some classes of seventh graders at Florida High School. O'Hare is also the author of the paperback textbook, Sentencecraft, published by Ginn in 1975. We used that text in Allentown in the spring of 1975 in an experiment with four classes of ninth-graders. The average verbal IQ of the group as a whole

was 104; the two teachers involved had no previous experience with either transformational grammar or the sentence-combining approach. Each class used the O'Hare text for approximately 45 hours and covered about 90 per cent of the book.

Since the initial experiment, many other teachers have used the approach, though not necessarily the O'Hare text. We have used it with the best and with the worst students we have and in every grade from fifth to tenth. Wherever we have tried it, it has worked. However, the only formal experimentation whose results are complete is the ninth-grade experiment referred to above; thus all figures given below are from that research.

Before giving figures and discussing the values of the technique, let us see how well you do on the sentence-combining problems on the two following handouts. (See SENTENCE-COMBINING and WRITING A STORY.)

The purpose of the first handout is to introduce you to the three main sentence-combining signals. Once you grasp these, you can write hundreds of sentence-combining problems of your own. The second handout illustrates the kind of thing you can do once the basic signals are mastered. Keep in mind that I have designed these handouts for your use, to provide an overview of the approach. Although I have successfully used these two handouts in a fifth-grade mentally gifted class, I would ordinarily proceed much more slowly in working with students.

For example, in a given class on a given day, one might use ten pairs of sentences, each of which might deal with the appositive phrase. The appropriate signal--underlining if one is doing appositives--would

SENTENCE-COMBINING

The basic idea of the program is to combine sets of short sentences into longer sentences. In order to do this, one has to become familiar with three sentence-combining signals.

1. The parentheses signal. When something appears in the parentheses at the end of a sentence, use it at the beginning of that line. After you have it there, write the two sentences as one. Always write the first sentence first.

   I haven't seen her.
   She was a little girl. (since)

   _____

2. The underlining signal. When something is underlined, use only that part of that sentence. Throw away the rest of the sentence. Then put the underlined words in the best place in the previous sentence. IMPORTANT: Never add any words unless they are shown in parentheses at the end of a sentence.

   Mr. Jones was shouting.
   Mr. Jones was our football coach.

   _____

3. The SOMETHING signal. When you see the word "something" printed in capital letters, it means "put something else in this place." You first take out SOMETHING. Then you put in its place whatever you find in the next line.

   Alice said SOMETHING.
   She knew the answer.

   _____

Now try the following complex sentence-combining problem:

Marcie realized SOMETHING.
She was supposed to like Walt Whitman. (that)
Walt Whitman was the famous American poet.
She hated him. (, but)

_____

_____

WRITING A STORY

You can write part of a story about a famous American Indian athlete by doing the sentence-combining problems below. For each problem, write your sentence on your paper. Then write the next sentence right after it. (Paragraph where necessary.)

1. Jim Thorpe spent his early years fishing.
   Jim Thorpe was an American Indian.
   He spent his early years hunting. (,)
   He spent his early years swimming. (,and)
   There were few schools for Indians. (because)
   He was young. (when)

2. He spent years in physical activities. (because)
   His body became strong. (,)
   His body became hard. (and)
   He learned to run and jump like a deer. (,and)

3. Jim grew older, however. (as)
   He began to realize SOMETHING.
   Education was also important. (that)

4. Fortunately, many people felt SOMETHING.
   Indians should be able to go to school. (that)
   Indians wanted an education. (who)
   These people started schools for Indians. (,and)

5. Jim Thorpe got his chance.
   He got his chance for an education.
   They opened an Indian school. (when)
   They opened it in Carlyle, Pennsylvania.
   He lived there. (where)

6. He learned to read. (although)
   He learned to write. (and)
   Jim always loved sports best.
   He became a star. (;and)
   He became a star in five sports.
   He was still in school. (while)

be discussed, and perhaps an example or two would be done. Then the students would do the remaining problems. When all have finished, the teacher asks students to read answers aloud and asks if the answers are good English sentences. Ideally, the correctness of the responses is determined by the vote of the students, but the teacher may enter when the vote is 50-50 or close to that. There are, of course, many variations on this basic model.

What Are the Advantages of This Approach?

First of all, sentence combining acquaints students with the resources of their language by actively involving them in using these resources. Students don't merely underline appositive phrases, for example, they write sentences containing them. Note that this method allows one to introduce some difficult structures at a comparatively young age. This is in marked contrast to the terminology-dominated traditional approach. One cannot ask a sixth-grader to write a gerund phrase, for example, because the sixth-grader won't know what the teacher is talking about. But through sentence combining it is very easy to teach students to write gerund phrases.

As students meet and use the resources of their language, a second benefit of the program ensues: They write maturer sentences. At least this is what O'Hare (and others) have found. In our Allentown experiment, the results were not as dramatic as those achieved by O'Hare, but three of the four classes wrote significantly maturer sentences at the end of the experiment. Given the fact that students spent only 45 hours on sentence-combining activities, we were very pleased with our results.

(For a discussion of the concept of sentence maturity, see O'Hare's Sentence Combining.)

Third, there is ample evidence that sentence-combining activities improve writing competence in general. When we asked twelfth-grade English teachers to make holistic judgments of writing quality, giving them pairs of essays written by students in the experimental groups, the post-experimental essays were judged better than the pre-experimental essays 74.2 per cent of the time. These teachers had no knowledge of the experiment and could not tell which of the two essays was pre- or post-experimental. O'Hare and others have achieved equally good or even better results when comparing experimental groups with control groups.

Fourth, the program may help students avoid the writing of fragments and run-ons. I say "may" because we did not use a control group. But we did find that there were 34 per cent fewer fragments and 15 per cent fewer run-ons in the post-experimental essays than in the pre-experimental essays. These figures do not take into account the fact that the students wrote longer essays at the end of the experiment than they had initially.

If we may assume that the length of a piece of writing is an index of a student's self-confidence, then a fifth possible advantage of the sentence-combining approach is improvement in self-confidence. Although our students had the same amount of time to write their post-experimental essays as they did their pre-experimental essays, all classes wrote longer essays at the end than they had at the beginning of the experiment. It is worth noting that the group with the lowest verbal IQ (90.5) made

the most dramatic gain in this respect. Their post-experimental essays were 31 per cent longer than their pre-experimental essays.

A sixth possible advantage is improvement in spelling. During our experiment no attention was given to spelling as such, yet there were 22 per cent fewer words misspelled in the final essays than in the initial essays. When one remembers that the sentence-combining method requires students to write far more frequently than they normally would and that it stresses the copying of correctly spelled words, this statistic is much less surprising than it might at first seem.

Seventh, lessons can be so structured as to promote or reinforce the mastery of standard English. For instance, one can consciously build into the combining problems such written usage problems as the to/too contrast or the they're/their/there contrast. This is not done in the O'Hare text, but it will no doubt be done in the future. (We are doing it now in Allentown.) If one uses oral recitation of the answers to problems--as O'Hare reports having done--one might also achieve gains in spoken usage.

Finally, since punctuation is dealt with directly and at the same time that students are writing, there may be some gains in punctuation skills. Another reason for hoping for such gains is that the rules for correct punctuation are learned without reliance upon grammatical terminology.

With all these real or potential advantages, one might wonder whether there are any disadvantages. We found only one. Approximately 3 out of every 10 students in our experiment reported a negative

attitude toward sentence combining at the end of the experiment. We are not disturbed by this finding for three reasons. First of all, many more students reported great satisfaction with the program and truly enjoyed the challenge of the sentence-combining problems. Secondly, we did a great deal of sentence combining over a very short period of time, and this seemed to have caused some students to become "bored." Such a reaction could be lessened by spreading the work over a longer period of time. Thirdly, would the same students who had a negative response to sentence combining have a more positive response to other, more traditional, methods for achieving the same ends? I doubt it.

Although none of our students said anything about the matter, some might object to sentence combining on the ground that students are constantly dealing with someone else's "thoughts" and are not expressing their own. This would be a valid objection, I think, if sentence combining were meant to replace the composition aspect of the English program. But that is not its purpose at all. Its purpose is to replace the "grammar" part of the English program and to do it while improving the composition part, which the traditional teaching of traditional school grammar never managed to do. There is nothing in sentence combining that prevents students from doing their own writing; in fact, all research indicates that it helps them to do their own writing better. It may even make them better thinkers.

Conclusion: Back to Which Basics?

By now it is obvious that I believe we must be concerned with real basics--such as improving our students' abilities to use their language--and that in order to foster the mastery of such basics we cannot rely on

the methods of the past. In short, I believe that we must go forward to basics. Nevertheless, I would like to conclude this session, somewhat ironically, by calling to your urgent attention some "basics" well worth going back to. They are not the sort of "content basics" with which everyone seems so concerned. They might be called "learning-theory basics." Although marchers under the "basics" banner usually forget about these, without them all else is false gesturing, aimless fluttering in the wind.

The first of the learning-theory basics is Piaget's doctrine of readiness. Not very long ago I had an emergency call from a young, new teacher who was in great distress because she could not teach the terminology of traditional grammar to a below-average class of eighth-grade students. An excellent and highly intelligent teacher, she nevertheless had failed to consider the possibility that she could not and should not teach her students this material because they were not ready to learn it. She was being swept up in the "basics" tide, but at least she was sensitive enough to notice that her students were learning nothing. Would that many other teachers could develop the same sensitivity. One of the greatest dangers of the basics movement is that we will continue to ignore Piaget and "teach" too much, too soon.

Secondly, we must not forget what the behaviorial psychologists have taught us about the advantages of success or reward over failure or punishment in promoting learning. Remembering that, we should be able to see that doing grammar exercises is a very rich form of punishment for children who do not know how to do them and who always get their papers

back with "D's" or "F's." I am not suggesting that we coddle students but that we teach them.

Bloom and other advocates of mastery teaching believe that we can teach virtually anything to every child who is ready to learn it. But the carrot is an "A," not the threat of a hickory stick. We all know that nothing succeeds like success, but we don't always act as if we knew it. Incidentally, the sentence-combining strategy is one that practically guarantees success at every step of the way.

Thirdly, let us not forget John Dewey's injunction that we learn best by doing. There is much too much passivity on the part of students in the traditional grammar classroom. I observed a class not long ago in which 100 per cent of the talking was done by the teacher. When he paused (and he did so occasionally) to ask if there were any questions, not a single student opened his or her mouth. If the teacher took this as a sign that the students were following him, he was woefully mistaken. I didn't understand what he was saying a good deal of the time. Not passive student acceptance but active student imvolvement must be our guide if we really care about teaching. Note once again that this is a keystone of the sentence-combining method.

For my last basic I would like to go very far back indeed--to Aristotle. But before reminding you what Aristotle said, I would like to call your attention to an item on the Educational Quality Assessment tests that are being given throughout Pennsylvania. That item asks teachers whether their students are interested in learning. In one school whose results I have seen, 83 per cent of the teachers said that students were not interested in learning. Has human nature changed, then, since Aristotle wrote, "All

men by nature desire to know"?

I doubt that human nature has changed in this respect, and I suggest that the question the teachers were really responding to when they gave that overwhelmingly negative response was that the students were not interested in learning what they were teaching them. Certainly students are not interested--most of them, at least--in parsing or diagramming sentences. But that does not mean that they do not desire to know. Observe any primary-level class and you will quickly see that children desire to know. Our concern must be to keep this flame alive and not kill it by a misguided effort to go back to "basics."